Rep. Henry Waxman Takes to His New Role as Gadfly
The Los Angeles congressman says he´s simply keeping tabs on the White House

August 17, 2001

The Los Angeles Times

By Mark Z. Barabak

When Republicans laid siege to the Clinton administration, piling one investigation atop another, few defenders of the president were as staunch as Rep. Henry A. Waxman. He decried the pursuit as blind partisanship, a way for the GOP "to get even for Watergate."

But now that the proverbial shoe has switched feet, the Democrat from the west side of Los Angeles has assumed a new role, rather like that of his old nemeses. On issues from ethics to the environment, Waxman has emerged as one of the leading antagonists of President Bush and his underlings.

It is not all that different, Waxman says, from the oversight he performed back when he took on the tobacco industry or tangled with Detroit auto makers over air pollution. And he insists it is not payback for the torment the GOP inflicted on Bush's predecessor. "I don't see it as partisan to try to find out how any administration makes certain decisions or whether they exercise their power in a certain manner," Waxman said this week as he plied the Santa Monica Freeway, leaving a CNN interview for a rendezvous with three grandchildren. "The Congress is supposed to have the ability to know what the executive branch is doing."

From his perch on the House Government Reform Committee, Waxman has urged the Justice Department to investigate Karl Rove, the chief White House political strategist, for alleged conflicts of interest over his stock holdings; picked a fight with the administration over the secret drafting of its national energy plan; and most recently battled NBC over the network's conduct on election night.

(Waxman suggests that Jack Welchchairman of NBC's parent company, General Electric, and a GOP booster may have intervened in the network's decision to prematurely call the race for Bush. NBC President Andrew Lack called the allegation "untrue and rather foolish.")

Waxman Playing Role of 'Partisan Warrior'

From the White House perspective, it is all part of the Beltway ratatat that started well before Bush arrived from Texas.

"We understand there is a long history," said Dan Bartlett, a White House spokesman, who described Waxman as playing the role of "partisan warrior, as opposed to conducting the genuine investigative business of the Congress."

Of course, Democrats applied that description to Rep. Dan Burton, the Inspector Javertlike Indiana Republican who tortured the Clinton administration with serial subpoenas. Waxman, however, recoils from any comparison.

For one thing, he pointed out, as a member of the House minority, he lacks the subpoena power that Burton has enjoyed as chairman of the Government Reform Committee. Moreover, Waxman asserted, "we haven't made any accusations. . . . We've simply sent routine requests for information."

There is no personal pleasure, he insisted, in watching the Bush administration under the same congressional white glare that shined on President Clinton. But there are partisan points to be gained, which Waxman no doubt knows.

He is, after all, the lawmaker who summoned the heads of the nation's tobacco companies before Congress, where they swore an oath and posed like the world's most wellheeled police lineup.

Waxman, 61, represents a reliably solid Democratic district. The map reads like a roll call of affluence and liberal chic: Beverly Hills, Westwood, Bel Air, Santa Monica. The last tough election he faced was more than 30 years ago, when he ran as a 29 year old upstart for a seat in the state Assembly.

As Schoolboy, Wore Adlai Stevenson Button

Waxman, the grandson of Russian immigrants who fled czarist persecution at the turn of the century, grew up over his family's grocery store near Watts. His parents were loyal Democrats, his mother sending Waxman to school wearing an Adlai Stevenson button, which teachers made him remove.

After six years in the Assembly, Waxman was elected to Congress in 1974, part of the huge postWatergate class of reformminded Democrats. The irony is that for years Waxman and his old UCLA classmate, fellow Rep. Howard L. Berman (D-Mission Hills), ran the California equivalent of a political machine, marshaling vast sums to elect a cadre of likeminded Democrats, among them then Assemblyman Gray Davis.

Once in Congress, Waxman used his fundraising skills and political savvy to bypass the seniority system and become, in just his third term, chairman of a major health care and environmental subcommittee. At the time, critics said he bought the job through generous campaign contributions to his fellow Democrats.

But today, even foes acknowledge Waxman's legislative cunning and mastery of the congressional process. His accomplishments, good or bad, depending on how one views the notion of a large, activist federal governmentare undeniable.

During two decades in the Democratic majority in Congress, he helped expand Medicaid coverage for the poor and elderly, pushed for tougher clean air and water standards, more federal funding to fight AIDS, stiffer pesticide controls and tougher nursing home regulations. Many of his achievements came during the conservative eras of presidents Reagan and the elder Bush, and sometimes over strong opposition even within his own party.

Waxman's tenacity is the stuff of Capitol Hill legend. Once he blocked efforts to weaken clean air legislation by offering 600 amendments, which he wheeled in via shopping cart.

"He made his name as a substantive legislator," said professor Barbara Sinclair, a UCLA expert on Congress. "He masters a subject and has been very skilled at putting together a lot of different deals, often under very difficult circumstances."

With the GOP's 1994 takeover of Congress, Waxman was shorn of his subcommittee chairmanship and the attendant power to call hearings, summon witnesses and set the legislative agenda. On the Government Reform Committee, he serves as the senior Democrat. The oversight panel reviews programs throughout the federal government.

With a Republican in the White House, it is the difference between playing defense and offense (a sports analogy one probably wouldn't hear from Waxman, who is known to have few hobbies or interests outside of work).

"Rather than legislate, he is inquiring," said Rep. Sam Farr, a Carmel Democrat and compatriot since their days in the state Legislature. "Because that's all we can do."

And so the demands spring forth: to NBC, to cough up any videotapes showing the newsroom on election night; to Rove, to spell out his financial interests; to the White House, to detail the closeddoor deliberations that shaped Bush's energy policy.

Does that make the 5 foot 5 Waxman a conscientious watchdog or a vengeful partisan?

"Part of the job of Congress is to keep an eye on the administration," said UCLA's Sinclair. "On the other hand, finding that fine line is not easy. Where the administration is going to see it and where the other party is going to see it is obviously going to be quite different."